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ABSTRACT

Parts played by classroom teachers, school administrators, and students in the public schools' performance of three surrogatory roles have become indeterminate and fuzzy. Criteria related to in loco parentis, reinforcement of professed community values, and transmission of the culture of the arts and sciences no longer go without saying. The situation is similar in the domain of authority in the schools. The change in the schools from intellectual to political and administrative authority is not as yet common knowledge. The basis of authority to determine the contents and teaching of the curriculum does not go without saying. Teachers' status as pedagogical professionals is similarly unclear and uncertain. Institutions preparing classroom teachers are caught between two demands: (1) that of the academics who deny the need of any specialized professional work to teach, and (2) that of the schools pleading for "how-to" survival kits of competencies. Between these two there is little room for genuinely professional preparation of teachers. On the other hand, it goes without saying certainly that the public school teacher's lot is not a happy one. (RH)

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Criticism of the Public Schools--
What Goes Without Saying*

H. S. Broudy

Preface

A talk on "What Goes Without Saying" is odd, to say the least. Shouldn't there be a question mark at the end of it? Wouldn't it be more accurate to have the title read "What Ought Not to go Without Saying"? In any event doesn't this Forum series demonstrate that there isn't much about the schools that hasn't been said many, many times?

And yet, it is what is left unsaid, like the proverbial submerged portion of the iceberg that does the damage to unwary mariners. Unsaid premises can lead to unspoken conclusions, convictions, and confusions.

The domain of what goes without saying includes the obvious and what is or is supposed to be taken for granted. Talk about the obvious can take the form of platitudes or ceremonial ritualistic utterance. Elaboration of the obvious is a respectable stock in trade for academicians and their doctoral candidates. Scholars can make a career out of proving that the obvious is nothing of the kind. Ph.D. candidates are taught the tools of the trade. When in doubt about a good thesis topic, doubt the obvious. Indeed, some of the most important advances in the disciplines have resulted from doubting the obvious.

With respect to the current or recurrent discussion of the schools (once a decade), especially the public schools, despite the plethora of literature and publicity there are still a few matters that seem to go without saying and perhaps no longer do. I shall discuss three clusters of such ideas that require disinterment.

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*YMCA Friday Forum, April 13, 1984

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Surrogatory Roles

In loco parentis

Because schooling is so much an extension of child rearing, it has been taken for granted that the school stands in loco parentis to the pupil. This is sometimes recognized by law, but informally it goes without saying, for example, that if a child is hurt at school, the school personnel will give it the same sort of attention that a parent would. Within limits, the school is also allowed to discipline the pupil in the manner of a parent, a very wise and sensitive parent, to be sure.

The surrogatory role of the school with respect to the family goes without saying so long as there is tacit agreement as to the family the school represents. In small culturally homogeneous communities the tacit understanding exists because there is a general unspoken agreement about the nature and duties of the family.

In large heterogeneous communities who can identify the family that the school stands for? Which of the rich variety of household arrangements does the school represent or is supposed to represent?

Private schools can choose or be chosen by the families they are to represent; public schools cannot. Because they cannot, it does not go without saying that the schools can rely on the family for the psychic and physical logistics that render the pupil ready for formal instruction. Nor can they be sure how to substitute for parents.

The school and teacher cannot take for granted that homework, transportation, nutrition, health care will be taken care by the family. Each year in large cities there are reports that hundreds and perhaps thousands of parents have failed to have children immunized. School lunches are made necessary by

the inability of homes to provide adequate nutrition. If discipline is the target of complaint, what can the school assume about the family's role in it?

The Community

It goes without saying that the school will reinforce by precept and example the standards of decency expected by the community. That communities have two sets of standards--the professed and tolerated--also goes without saying. The school is supposed to reinforce the professed set of values. For example, there was a time when teachers were not supposed to frequent establishments serving liquor, and certainly none that resembled what is now called a singles bar. Today the school can only guess at the community standards of deportment or life styles, or standards of behavior for community leaders. Does the school recount in the classrooms the tales of iniquity and delinquency perpetrated in the community and described by the media?

What happens to the social studies when the school can no longer identify the community for which it stands? Silence, treading water, vagueness take the place of quiet inculcation of the community values.

The Culture

The school has always been taken as representative of the arts and sciences. The public school curriculum is an unpredictable selection from these disciplines. Teachers are supposed to be "educated" people, who exemplify as well as transmit something of the knowledge fit for an educated mind. However, the furniture of an educated mind is no longer uniform, arranged and delivered in a more or less uniform way. The SAT scores are understandably

a welcome oasis of uniformity amid the shifting sands of curriculum adaptations and innovations. Unfortunately, the SAT oasis is mistaken for the whole territory, shifting sands and all. This makes a shambles of generalizations on school quality. About the curriculum, less and less goes without saying, yet perhaps the less said the better.

In all three surrogatory roles, the part played by the teacher, the school administration, and the pupil have become indeterminate and fuzzy. Criteria no longer go without saying, albeit not a few of the distinguished members of no less distinguished commissions continue to think that they do.

Intellectual Authority

The second domain in which much of what is supposed to go without saying and no longer does is that of authority. In addition to the authority in matters of rules and conduct granted the school by the state there is the unspoken assumption that it is also authorized to design and prescribe the curriculum. To be sure, the body politic defacto can always shape the school's authority in a democratic society. Whether or not the school will teach about the evils of alcohol or the merits of driver safety; whether it will pay for a chemistry lab or a football field is subject to the will of the people as expressed through an elected school board. Anything the school does is always subject to the political authority of the electorate. Is there a de jure escape from Vox populi?

Are the criteria of a chemistry or history course decided by a plebiscite? Is the conceptual structure of chemistry arrived at by counting votes? If any vote is relevant it is that of certified chemistry scholars, but only because it registers their scientific judgment, not their political preference.

The criteria for quality in the disciplines are set at any particular time by the certified workers in that discipline. This generates and validates intellectual authority. (Consensus of the learned and one might hope of the wise.)

Does it go without saying that the school has or exercises such intellectual authority to determine the contents and teaching of the curriculum? That depends on the school, of course, and in our so-called "school system," schools within a mile of each other can differ in curriculum as in many other ways. In the last decade the curriculum of the public school has been politicalized to meet the demands of diverse constituencies. Any group with the will and the voice to make demands for or against this or that subject can exert pressure on the administration to change the curriculum. The school superintendent, once the institutional symbol of educational authority in the community, is now expected to be an acute and agile manager of public relations. However, the change from intellectual to political and administrative authority is not as yet common knowledge--not common enough to go without saying.

It is understandable, therefore, that some critics of the public schools may construe reluctance to exercise intellectual authority as intellectual incompetence. A school system in which most of the effort has to be devoted to getting pupils ready--emotionally, bodily, linguistically--for instruction in the academic disciplines may value qualities in teachers and administrators that are not primarily intellectual.

Teachers as Professional Educators

This brings me to the third cluster of verities that no longer go without saying. It is the notion of the classroom teacher as a pedagogical professional,

qualified to guide the learning of pupils with expertise grounded in theory analogous to other professions. Presumably that is expected of them by the several commissions. Could anything less qualify them to act as ideal parents, shrewd psychologists, expert didacticians, clever Socratic heuristicians, lovable role models and, it goes without saying, competent scholars.

A society that expects, without saying it in so many words, the school to be its surrogate, must have teachers who embody Florence Nightingale, Dr. Spock, Socrates, Mark Hopkins and Mortimer Adler. Furthermore, if every classroom is to be served by such professionals, the public must be willing to pay professional salaries to two to three million of them. That it is not ready, willing or even able to do so goes without saying.

It is not that teachers do not need or could not profit from a high level of professional preparation or that they would not want to do so. Nor is the laxity of certification requirements to blame. In past decades young women with a sense of social mission, willing to remain unmarried and to live at home could move up from factory and routine office or sales employment by attending a normal school. This provided a large pool of cheap labor for the schools. Today a similar supply is provided by baccalaureates who have not made more lucrative career choices. This is disconcerting to disappointed parents, who point out that "The least you can do is get a teaching certificate." What would colleges of liberal arts do without a teacher certification program as an occupational safety net?

Institutions preparing classroom teachers are caught between two demands: that of the academics who deny the need of any specialized professional work to teach and that of the schools pleading for "how-to" survival kits of

competencies. Between these two there is little room for genuinely professional preparation of teachers.

Teachers, too, are torn between thinking of themselves as workers to be represented by unions that can bargain and lobby in their behalf and a professional guild with the mystique, requisites, and perquisites thereof. The current spate of recommendations to smarten up the teaching force--merit pay, competency examinations, periodic recertification, abolition of the NEA, teachers colleges, and certification requirements--reflect this ambivalence toward school teaching. Most of them rely on market incentives, but if so, it will take more than merit pay to match the rewards promised by other avenues of employment open to the capable liberal arts graduate.

For those who like to speak and think of teachers as members of a profession, it may be well to remember that in no other "profession" is an impostor who is doing well in practice praised as evidence against certification requirements. In no other profession is theory reduced to a minimum and "hands-on" experience so much extolled. In no other profession is in-service training expected to take the place of stringent and challenging pre-service specialized course requirements. And yet parents and the citizenry in general want more and expect more from the teacher of their children than a loosely assembled para-professional mother, nurse, and teaching machine.

So as Gilbert and Sullivan might sing, "Taking one thing with another, the lot of the public school teacher is not a happy one." That certainly goes without saying.